



EUROPEAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRE



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EUROPEAN STUDIES MEP CANDIDATES DEBATE EUROPE

17 March 2014, European Documentation Centre

On Monday 17 March 2014, the European Documentation Centre (EDC) of the Institute for European Studies hosted a debate in collaboration with the European Parliament Office, where upcoming European Parliament (EP) election candidates, all former European Studies students at the Institute, participated in a discussion panel on some salient issues related with the European elections. The candidates in attendance were Kevin Cutajar, Miriam Dalli and Cyrus Engerer. Dr. Peter Agius, head of the European Parliament Office in Malta chaired the event; Prof Arnold Cassola, an EP election candidate for Alternattiva Demokratika was present as a member of the audience and participated from the floor.



Professor Roderick Pace, Director of the Institute and Jean Monnet Professor, opened the event with some introductory remarks on the importance of bringing Europe back to the Maltese EP election campaign. The debate started with a discussion on the proportional representation of the political groups in the EP committees and how to overcome the disadvantage that this causes to small countries like Malta whose delegation of six MEPs cannot possibly participate in all the committees.

The candidates discussed the limitations of this system which, coupled by the material limitations on the MEPs' agenda, translates to the fact that Maltese MEPs sit on roughly only half of the 22 committees; this means that there are no Maltese MEPs sitting in important committees such as the agricultural committee, the legal affairs committee, the constitutional affairs committee and the industry committee, to name a few. Of course this counts also for other small member states with small MEP delegations.

In their responses, all the candidates emphasized that this sparse representation does not imply that Malta should feel inferior to other member states at a European level as they discussed ways in which this drawback could be overcome. The issue of lobbying was discussed as a way of overcoming this disadvantage and was also given due importance. Dr Kevin Cutajar stated that he would choose to work in the committees in which he would be able to address the priorities that he believes in. He mentioned the internal market committee as being one such potential area he would be able to work in, together with the social affairs committee. His interest in the latter is based upon his personal experience and the growing need to promote the rights of persons with disabilities and persons facing social challenges which are already available but which citizens around the EU are not so aware of.





Dr Miriam Dalli stressed the importance of making the utmost of Malta's six seats to secure as many benefits for Malta and its people. She claimed that at the end of the day, the MEPs would be representing Maltese citizens. She spoke of the importance of the Maltese working together as a group, leaving aside

partisan politics. Should she be elected, her core interest areas are employment issues, particularly job creation, reducing the bureaucratic pressures on business, especially SMEs, and the energy sector.

Mr Cyrus Engerer spoke of the need for a team effort suggesting the notion of 'Team Malta'. Mr Engerer stressed the point that Maltese MEPs should, in his view, work together to get the utmost from their small representation at the EP. He suggested that this could be achieved by seeking membership of committees which have the most impact on Maltese national interest. He also came out in favour of tactical voting, i.e. voting with other MEPs on issues which are of marginal importance to Malta, in return for voting support on issues that are important for Malta.

The panel then discussed the phenomenon of the rise in popularity of the Eurosceptics and its effect on the coalition of Europhiles. The number of "pro-Europe" MEPs could fall in the next EP legislature and the budding MEPs debated the possible causes of anti-European integration sentiment as well as whether a reasonable amount of Eurosceptics within the European Parliament could be beneficial for the better functioning of the Parliament. All candidates concurred that this phenomenon is not one to be ignored, and that it reflects a lack of trust in the EU which is increasingly rising amongst its citizens. Dr Dalli stated that, though in theory the rise of Eurosceptics might be perceived as healthy in the fact that discussions at the European Parliament will be diverse and taken different points of view, problems would arise if particular groups would constantly block the initiatives being debated. Cutajar and Engerer both claimed that the increase in Euroscepticism was being fanned by the media which of course influences public perceptions.

Questioned about what *they* would bring to Europe, the candidates were asked how they would contribute to the agenda of the European Parliament and of the European Union. They were asked to answer the question without any reference to Malta. Mr Engerer started by questioning whether there is in fact a European Parliament agenda, something he was reluctant to agree with. Should he be elected, he said that he would speak up about the 'heavy issues' and for what he believes to be the best for Malta and for the citizens. Citing the example of migration, Engerer expressed his belief that it is very difficult for an MEP to detach himself from his constituency. Dalli defined the European Parliament as a group of people who are pushing forward the European project, who want to see the EU as a player in the international arena whilst representing half a billion citizens around the 28 EU member states: she calls this a 'balancing act' in which she would like to be an active participant. She spoke of an EU which, at a macro level, gains strength as an international player, while on the micro level shows that it cares more for its citizens by addressing their needs. Cutajar agreed that it is extremely difficult for an MEP to be detached from his constituency since, at the end of the day, the issues being discussed at the EP will ultimately originate in some way or another from the constituency - or are for their benefit. He pledged to contribute to the European project, and to do his utmost to take the right decisions, should he be elected. Cutajar stressed once again the fact that every vote which an MEP casts will affect half a billion citizens all over Europe.



The debate ended with an assessment of the next Commission President. The candidates discussed the qualities that president Barroso's successor should have: whether he should be a 'realist' or a president in the 'older mould' who would take new initiatives in furthering European integration. Cutajar defined Jean Claude Juncker, from the European People's Party, as an "interesting choice", due to the fact that he has been a key player in Europe for a number of years. He expressed the belief that Juncker would

be a good replacement for Barroso, who led the Commission through very tough times, though he added that it would be fairer to judge Junker on his actions following his election, should he be chosen as Commission president.

Dalli started by saying that the past Commission was detached from what was happening on the ground: she defined the past Commission as one which followed what was going on in Europe, rather than taking the initiatives. She called Martin Schulz, the Party of European Socialists and Democrats (S&D) candidate for Commission president, an interesting choice when it comes to Malta, considering the fact that he has often come to the island, he knows Malta well because he has personal connections with many Maltese and knows what is going on. Speaking on the S&D manifesto, she expressed concern on the way the issue of irregular migration is tackled, particularly Dublin II, and claimed that she would like to see more initiatives in this respect.



Engerer stated that the EU needs a president of the European Commission who is practical according to what is happening on a European level, and one who knows the circumstances of each and every member state. He believes that the Commission president should do his utmost to avoid the pitfall of a 'one size fits all' mentality for Europe. He believes that Schulz is currently showing how important it is for the Commission to be close to the citizens by touring Europe and knocking on doors; this is a familiar strategy in Maltese electoral campaigns and it is one which, in Engerer's view, will enable Schulz to get a good perspective of what citizens all around Europe are feeling. Shultz will be able to see for himself whether there are Europe-wide concerns or concerns which are specific to a particular member state. The new Commission should, according to Mr Engerer, be close to the people, know the people's concerns and it should act upon them.

Participants from the floor posed questions on an array of issues including the core areas of interest of the candidates, whether politicians should shoulder some of the responsibility for the rise of anti-EU sentiment, and perceptions of the high MEP salaries in the context of the period of austerity we are currently facing.

